

INTERTECT  
Sri Lanka Reconstruction Project  
Advisory Mission

NGO Participation in the Sri Lanka  
Reconstruction Programme  
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NGO PARTICIPATION IN THE SRI LANKA  
RECONSTRUCTION PROGRAM

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SUMMARY:

Prior to the signing of the Indo-Sri Lanka Peace Accord, NGOs in Sri Lanka played a major role in providing assistance in areas that the government could not reach with programs of relief and short-term assistance. Since the signing of the Peace Accord, however, the role of NGOs has declined due, in part, to a lack of resources and the changing nature of assistance requirements. Despite initial hopes of program planners, the NGOs are not likely to be a major factor in the Emergency Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Programme (ERRP).

I. BACKGROUND

During the fighting between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil militants in the North and East, the NGOs of Sri Lanka played a major role in providing assistance to the victims of the war on both sides. NGOs were active in rebuilding housing, providing food aid and medical and health services. They were also actively engaged in programs for survivors of persons killed in the conflict and they assisted the handicapped as well as persons psychologically affected by the conflict. Most important, they were very active in providing a wide range of assistance to displaced persons throughout the country.

Based on the involvement of NGOs during the conflict, program planners envisioned a major role for them in the reconstruction program and several of the major sectoral programs (housing and agriculture) were designed with a major NGO component. For example, in the housing sector the initial approach was to expand an existing programme the NGOs had developed with the government during the conflict whereby money they raised was matched by the government and the NGO provided organization and technical assistance to the families to build their houses. The ERRP planners had hoped to use this approach for reaching the lowest income sectors since involving the NGOs would ensure that the hardest to reach families would be brought into the program and adequately assisted.

In the agricultural sector it had been hoped that the NGOs would be able to provide a wide range of agricultural services to the lowest income groups and provide community organization services that would enable the farmers to carry out a number of rehabilitation works cooperatively with guidance and assistance from NGOs.

In both cases, these hopes appear to have been overly optimistic.

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## II. REASONS FOR THE REDUCED ROLE OF NGOS

There are several reasons why NGOs are not likely to play a major role in the reconstruction effort, at least for the present. They are:

- a. The sheer scale of the reconstruction requirements is beyond the capacity of even the largest NGOs or NGO consortium. Even if all of the NGOs were to receive twice the amount of money now allocated for NGOs, their total contribution would be approximately 1% of the total project cost.
- b. Due to the continuing violence, the NGOs have not been able to raise as much money for reconstruction activities as they had planned. At the same time much of their work remains relief focused and short-term projects make up the balance of their assistance.
- c. The capacity of the NGOs to implement major portions of the various sectoral projects of the overall reconstruction program is not strong. Only three of the major agencies were involved in housing reconstruction, only three in agricultural reconstruction, none in fishing and only a few in income generating activities -- but those only at a very small scale and for specific target groups (widows and handicapped).
- d. The capacity of the NGOs to provide technical assistance for critical reconstruction sub sectors, such as building materials production and marketing, community organization for housing construction, etc. was, on balance, less than the capacity of government organizations. While many NGOs did express a willingness to work in these areas, on close inspection, it was found that they did not have the necessary expertise.
- e. Despite the fact that there are scores of NGOs in the affected area, few have any real capacity to implement even moderate-scale programs. The few national organizations that are well financed and managed (for example, SARVODAYA) are often not politically acceptable to one or the other ethnic groups in the area.
- f. Many of the NGOs, despite attempts to remain neutral, have been compromised in the eyes of one or more parties to the conflict and therefore, it will be difficult for the government to work with them. Even if full peace were restored, it would be politically difficult at this time for the Sri Lankan government to choose any of the national or local NGOs as a conduit for funds coming from the government and, in fact, many of the organizations that had been considered likely candidates for such funding, have expressed their reluctance to accept funds from the government. There is a feeling that any peace agreement would be very fragile and organizations shouldn't be put into a position where they couldn't provide immediate relief aid if there was to be a sudden resumption of fighting.
- g. Due to the fact that most disaster victims have been multiply affected (i.e. they have lost not only their house but also their source of income) the total assistance requirements are

sufficiently large that they will not be able to be met only by grants. Some loan component must be added. Few NGOs have the ability to participate in long-term loan programs whereby loan portfolios must be managed for anywhere from three to twenty years.

### III. THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE NGOS

Despite the above limitations, there are opportunities for major NGO involvement in the reconstruction effort. The major international NGOs are working to define programs to support certain hard to reach groups and to identify communities where their assistance can be helpful. (It has been argued that the reconstruction program should identify areas where the government cannot work currently as places where the NGOs could be helpful. In reality, any place where the government cannot work, NGOs cannot work either.)

Based on recent discussions with the NGOs and a major rethinking of the role of NGOs in the reconstruction effort the NRSC and the NGO consortium are now working to define a more focused approach to NGO involvement. At present we see the NGO role as follows:

- a. To assist special groups that are difficult for the government to reach. Among these groups are:
  1. Estate Tamils
  2. Sinhalese and Muslim communities in the East
  3. Returning refugees
  4. Internally displaced persons outside the primary conflict areas
- b. To provide specialized assistance to individuals and families who have suffered the loss of one or more family members or who have been handicapped.
- c. To help the very low-income people obtain programme benefits. It is recognized that many of the very lowest income people may have difficulties in obtaining the government services that they are eligible to receive. NGOs have been asked to work among those groups to help them qualify and receive their entitlements.
- d. To provide social services in the affected areas especially focusing on the problems of women, children, victims of violence and young men who were formally militants or members of the Home Guards (Sinhalese militia).
- e. To provide economic assistance for people classified as "most affected" i.e. widows, families who have lost a bread-winner and families that have suffered the loss of more than two members.
- f. To organize activities to provide alternative work to persons in sectors or communities where reconstruction work cannot commence at the present time. For example, due to the security situation, fishermen are restricted to fishing during certain daylight hours

and not more than five kilometers from the coast. In practical terms, this means that many of the fishermen are unable to earn a living, therefore additional assistance is required and NGOs have been asked to organize alternative economic activities as a means of providing income support until the restrictions are lifted.

- g. To plug the gaps in the overall programme. There are scores of groups of people who, for one reason or another, will fall through the cracks or will be difficult to reach with the assistance that is planned. The NGOs can help reach these types of groups (as long as the numbers of beneficiaries are relatively small and their locations can be clearly identified).

#### IV. OBSERVATIONS FROM THE SRI LANKA EXPERIENCE

Based on the Sri Lanka experience several observations about the role of NGOs in the rehabilitation and reconstruction periods can be made. They are:

- a. NGOs can play a very positive role in plugging the gaps in the assistance system.
- b. NGOs can be used to reach the hard-core disadvantaged and others that are difficult to reach, especially those that will require intensive casework.
- c. NGOs can be extremely helpful in providing assistance to politically difficult groups (for example, Estate Tamils and Muslims and Sinhalese in Tamil controlled areas).
- d. As a rule, NGOs should be encouraged to provide assistance that builds on their existing strengths and to avoid attempting to provide services where their capacity is limited. In the case of Sri Lanka, the government and the cooperative often had better resources than the NGOs.
- e. As a rule, NGOs are more likely to have a major role in assisting affected persons during the actual conflict (with relief assistance), in the immediate aftermath (with short-term rehabilitation and assistance), and during periods such as that we are now experiencing (which we call the "grey period") with short-term relief and rehabilitation activities and assistance. They are not likely to play a major role in long-term reconstruction since few have the ability to participate in loan schemes (which require an institutional capacity to manage a loan portfolio for three to twenty years).
- f. NGOs can be most helpful in assisting people with assistance that can be delivered via cash grants, grants-in-aid, or programs involving sales (at full or subsidized prices) of critically needed relief items or reconstruction materials.
- g. NGOs can be helpful in providing supplemental assistance in certain sectors. For example, in the agricultural sector here in

Sri Lanka, there is a need to help low-income farmers replace draught animals and livestock and poultry. In some cases, the proposed system of loans and grants will simply not provide enough assistance for low-income people to rehabilitate field crops and replace livestock at the same time. In these cases, NGOs can be helpful in providing supplemental assistance to enable farmers to replace all of their losses without having to go into debt or delay activities that would help them to diversify their income generating opportunities.

#### VI. CONCLUSION:

Despite the limited involvement of the NGOs in the reconstruction period at this time, it is anticipated that the NGOs will expand their operations into a broader range of activities once full peace is restored in the affected areas. Even so their role will be one of limited short-term assistance rather than longer-term widespread aid.